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UNCLAS AMMAN 000471

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR PRM, IO, NEA AND L

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREF PREL PGOV KPAL IS JO

SUBJECT: GUIDANCE REQUEST FOR UNRWA ADVISORY COMMISSION

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING

REF: 04 AMMAN 8809

¶11. (U) This message has been cleared by Consulate General Jerusalem, and contains a request for Department guidance in advance of a January 24 extraordinary meeting of UNRWA's Advisory Commission.

¶12. (SBU) UNRWA has requested an extraordinary meeting of its Advisory Commission (AdCom) in Amman on Monday, January 24. It is asking the 10-member UNGA-mandated body to decide whether UNRWA should break with its internal staff regulations, and past UN practice, in order to permit its local staff to stand in municipal elections in Gaza and the West Bank without resigning their UNRWA appointments.

BACKGROUND

¶13. (SBU) In accordance with its area staff regulations and personnel directives, UNRWA distributed a memorandum to all Gaza and the West Bank Field employees on January 6 informing any UNRWA staff members who intended to stand as candidates in municipal council elections that they would need to submit their resignation no later than the day they presented their nomination papers. The memorandum continued to note "If those who resign in order to run for office are not elected, promptly submitted applications for reinstatement will be regarded sympathetically, but there can be no guarantee of reinstatement." While 13 local staff intending to run in the first round of municipal elections in Gaza on January 27 have complied with these regulations, 21 others are protesting. According to UNRWA, several "prominent Palestinian public figures and officials" have taken up their cause, asserting that UNRWA's requirement is "contrary to PA law," that the municipal council positions are "non-political in nature," and that UNRWA is effectively removing a talented pool of candidates from public service, as the municipal councilor positions are unpaid. (NOTE: Refcoord has faxed PRM/ANE a full background note prepared by UNRWA's External Relations and Legal Affairs Departments, which contains a copy of Law no. (22) of 1997 concerning local elected bodies. END NOTE.)

¶14. (SBU) UNRWA's Legal Affairs Department notes that the UN has required its locally-recruited staff to resign their posts in similar situations (e.g., Afghanistan, East Timor, Kosovo). However, senior UNRWA officials argue privately that the unions who represent UNRWA's 12,500 locally-recruited staff in Gaza and the West Bank will not be persuaded by that argument, as the UN has authorized UNRWA to follow a unique approach to other issues -- or example, the UN's decision to employ UNRWA staff at a lower pay scale than other locally-recruited staff working in the region for other UN agencies. These UNRWA officials believe that these staff unions, which are highly politicized, will call for a strike similar to the one that paralyzed the Agency's West Bank operations this fall (reftel). UNRWA Deputy ComGen Karen Abu Zayd told Refcoord January 19 that PLO Refugee Affairs Department Head Dr. Zakaria al Agha is advocating strongly in favor of allowing UNRWA staff to retain their positions while holding elected office, and will likely press UNRWA to reverse its position at Monday's meeting.

¶15. (SBU) COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST: UNRWA has indicated that it will not/advocate for a particular position at the extraordinary meeting, fearing that openly opposing the PLO will induce its unions to strike. We have been unable to reach Jordan's new Department of Palestinian (DPA) DG (who will chair Monday's meeting) due to the Eid holidays and are uncertain what tact he intends to take. Given his inexperience, we suspect he will be inclined to leave any decision to the remaining AdCom members. Posts seek Department guidance. END COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST.

¶16. (U) UNRWA Advisory Commission: Jordan (current Chair), Belgium, Egypt, France, Japan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, UK and U.S. The PLO also attends Commission meetings as an observer.

